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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1675
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1542
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 3858
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2111
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2575
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000704

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, DRL, EEB
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: PLANS FOR EDUCATION REFORM SEEK TO END
NIYAZOV'S LEGACY

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: If all goes according to plan, the 2008 school year should look a lot different than the start of the 2007 school year. Former President Niyazov's "book of the soul," the "Ruhnama," will no longer be taught in schools. Class sizes will be much smaller, teachers should have smaller work loads, and plans are for the Internet to be connected in 40-50 new school buildings. Despite the plans, a serious shortage of teachers continues to limit how quickly the government can improve the education system. In the meantime, parent's discontent with Turkmenistan's education system has given impetus to the development of parallel, for-pay educational structures. END SUMMARY.

BYE-BYE RUHNAMA

13. (SBU) Teachers and students have told Embassy personnel that former President Niyazov's Ruhnama or "book of the soul," will be removed from the curricula of schools and universities beginning with the new academic year in 2008. Knowledge of the Ruhnama and of Niyazov and his family will no longer be a primary theme for the secondary school graduation exam. Several teachers told us that they instruct their secondary school students that the name of the former president is not to be mentioned in essays. Classrooms have already started dismantling their "Ruhnama Corners," removing the books and taking down posters. Niyazov's portraits and Ruhnama posters have already been removed from the lobby of the Ministry of Education. The Ruhnama has also been gradually phased-out of other sectors of society. Since 2007, government sector employees such as doctors and policemen are no longer attending Saturday Ruhnama seminars. The Ministry of Education confirmed that it is still revising history textbooks and other social science books, removing Ruhnama and Niyazov citations and quotes.

MORE SCHOOL REFORMS

14. (SBU) The Ministry of Education will also introduce classroom reforms affecting teachers and students. Class sizes will come down from 40-plus students per class to 24 pupils per class in primary school and 30 pupils per class for other grades. Staff hours, the number of hours required to teach full time per week, was lowered

from 36 hours to 24. With a smaller workload and smaller class size, the government has announced plans to open 40-50 new schools by September 2008 and has allocated \$500 million to build and equip them with smart boards, computers, and Internet access. (NOTE: EmbOff has seen only one of these new schools built and equipped, but an Internet connection could not be verified. Our assessment is that the plans to put Internet in 40-50 schools within a few months may be too ambitious. END NOTE.) Teachers have been telling students that pupils entering the 4th grade in fall 2008 will graduate after 11 years of schooling.

WHERE ARE THE TEACHERS?

15. (SBU) The Ministry has yet to recruit or hire teachers for all the new schools expected to come online in September 2008 and in many respects, it is still grappling with severe shortages of teachers for the current number of schools. In 2001, 15,000 teachers were laid off when, under Niyazov's instructions, the Ministry of Education reduced the number of years of education from 10 to 9 and increased the number of staff hours from 18 to 36. This has resulted in students being taught by unqualified teachers: some German and Russian teachers have been tasked with teaching English, while math teachers in many schools were tasked with teaching biology. In the provinces, often a single secondary school teacher will teach multiple subjects, such as math, science, and language.

PRIVATE-SECTOR EDUCATION

16. (SBU) As a response to Niyazov's drastic changes in Turkmenistan's education system, a parallel education system has

ASHGABAT 00000704 002 OF 002

emerged in the private sector. Organizations such as the Turkmen-run "Sultan Dag" school and the Turkish-run "Bashkent School" that offer tuition-based vocational courses in accounting, computers, and foreign languages, are hugely popular and expanding. The Turkish-run "Turkmen-Turkish" schools offer primary and secondary education at international standards for 250,000 manat per month (approximately \$24). Competition for admission is stiff, with nearly ten pupils applying per available seat. Many parents pay for private tutors to supplement their child's education in subjects such as math, biology, and Russian. The Ministry has taken notice, and the director of the Institute for Strategic Planning has confirmed that private education and tuition-based education in universities has been included in Turkmenistan's strategic education development plan through 2020.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: It is a good sign that President Berdimuhamedov appears to be confident enough to embark on a course to eliminate the impact of his predecessor's harmful policies on Turkmenistan's education system. The end of Ruhnama classes is an important step forward. However, overcoming the enormous challenges left by Niyazov's legacy -- especially the teacher deficit -- will take considerable time. Although the introduction and growth of private-sector programs may be less than ideal from the perspective of control-oriented Ministry officials, this perhaps offers the best assurance that needed reforms will be made sooner, rather than later. END COMMENT.

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